

VOICES OF VISN 6

— Excellent Care — Earned by Veterans — Delivered Here —

BRAIN SURGERY RELIEVES Parkinson's Disease

Symptoms of Army Veteran, Now Living His Best Life

Inside This Issue



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A 56-year-old Army Veteran diagnosed with Parkinson's disease (PD) is now thriving thanks to care received at Central Virginia VA Health Care System. Under the care of a neurologist at the VA hospital in Salisbury, N.C., Jeff Howe had reached the max level of medication allowed. This caused disabling side effects for him.

Howe was referred to the Parkinson's Disease Research Education and Clinical Center (PADRECC), where patients work with an interdisciplinary team who manages their care.

Even though Howe lived 300 miles

away, his initial evaluation and subsequent follow-ups came via telehealth. When it became apparent his medication had lost its effectiveness, Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS) was recommended.

"I used to have to take a nap two to three times a day," Howe said. "I had a lack of movement; my jaw would lock up, and I had real bad fatigue."

DBS involves placing a small wire into the brain to deliver a well-controlled electrical current. To function as an "off switch" for certain brain signals that cause abnormal physical movements. This disruption restores more normal

TOP PHOTO: Courtesy of Miriam Hirsch

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Message from the Network Director



As I reflect on the achievements made by the VA Mid-Atlantic Health Care Network over this past year, I am proud to say that we have done a great job in accomplishing the Secretary's top priorities for 2019; Customer Service, Implementing the MISSION Act, Electronic Health Record and Transforming our Business Systems. In fact, you may not know this, but VISN 6 did such a great job of implementing the MISSION Act, we were recognized nationally, by the Executive in Charge!

We have been so fortunate to be able to add such wonderful staff to our team, allowing us to continue focusing on our Veterans. As we move into 2020, we will continue to focus on the top priority initiatives underway. Our network will be opening new clinic spaces in both Virginia and North Carolina in an effort to better serve our Veterans; we will be placing a

higher focus on Veteran access to care, by increasing our programs; and we will finalize the implementation of Full Practice Authority (FPA) throughout the network.

Full Practice Authority means that advanced practice nurses will be recognized as licensed Independent practitioners, and will be privileged for skills they can perform independently. By doing this, we immediately expand the volume of providers who will be able to provide care to our Veterans. This will not only help in face-to-face situations, but it will also help in our expansion of Telehealth services.

As we begin to expand and streamline the telehealth model across the VISN, we are really trying to consider the many Veterans that are not close to a VA hospital and live in rural areas. Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS) is a service, which provides Veterans

who live in rural areas the ability to schedule and attend telehealth appointments in civilian retail space, such as Walmart and CVS. Actually, on December 10, 2019, VISN 6 opened our first ATLAS site in a Walmart store located in Asheboro, North Carolina. This was such a significant milestone for our network, and what an honor it was to be able to have Secretary Wilkie there to celebrate with us!

I truly believe that the many efforts being made across the country will only ensure ease for our Veterans receiving care. Our Veterans will not only "Choose VA" this year, they will believe in the VA!

– DeAnne M. Seekins
VISN 6 Network Director

SECRETARY'S LATEST TOUR THROUGH N.C. INITIATES HISTORIC TELEHEALTH PILOT

Collaboration by I VISN 6 PUBLIC AFFAIRS, WITH DURHAM AND SALISBURY PUBLIC AFFAIRS TEAMS

VISN 6 Network Director DeAnne Seekins accompanied Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert L. Wilkie on a visit to Durham VA's main facility Dec. 9, before traveling to Asheboro, N.C., Dec. 10 for an historic ribbon cutting.

Secretary Wilkie's trip began with Durham's leadership brief on overall concerns, growth and the future of VA health care in central and eastern North Carolina. The son of a career Army officer, Wilkie spent his formative years in Fayetteville, N.C., so he is familiar with the Durham area. Seekins, who is a former Durham VA Director, escorted the Secretary and current facility leadership through the building, visiting with Veterans, talking with staff, and presenting awards to deserving employees.

Wilkie visited the Cardio Cath Lab, to see the newly introduced, cutting-edge surgical

technology CardioMEMS, as well as the Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Audiology and Speech Pathology Services.

In fact, the Secretary took time to speak with Army Veteran Jason Horton, via a Telehealth connection.

"I've been doing telehealth through Durham VA for over a year now," said Horton. "I didn't expect to see Secretary Wilkie on the other screen. Certainly, one of the better sessions I've had."

During this visit, the Secretary expressed his appreciation for DVAHCS staff's ability to meet the unique needs of local Veterans.

"Our numbers are going up; we're getting more Veterans through the door and into the VA system," he said. "That's something everyone here should be proud of."

Since taking office in July of 2018, Secretary Wilkie has made a point of visiting

VA facilities across the country, meeting with Veterans and staff to discuss real issues and create workable and realistic solutions.

The journey through Carolina continued the following day. Secretary Wilkie and Mrs. Seekins joined Salisbury VA Health Care System Director Joseph Vaughn, VA's National Director of Synchronous Telehealth, Dr. Leonie Heyworth and officials from Wal-Mart's national office Dec. 10 to cut the ribbon enabling telehealth services for local Veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs and Wal-Mart cut the ribbon in Asheboro, N.C., Dec. 10 on a new pilot location for the VA-led Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations (ATLAS) service.

ATLAS is a new initiative in which VA, Wal-Mart and T-Mobile are connecting Veterans living in rural areas with VA doctors,

STORY CONTINUED ON PAGE 7



SALISBURY VA EMPLOYEE ASSOCIATION HOSTS ANNUAL CHILDREN'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

On Dec. 14, 2019, the Salisbury VA Employee Association (VAEA) hosted its annual Children's Christmas Party. The event was held in the Main Street area of the Salisbury VA Medical Center's Community Living Center (CLC), and was open to all children and grandchildren of Salisbury VA Health Care System employees.

Mike Day, VAEA President, Mary Cullop, VAEA Secretary, Nikki Chapman, VAEA Treasurer, and Board members Sharon Jones, Tonya Marr and Aiesha Collins organized and executed this fantastic and very well-attended event. Some of the activities extended to the children included professional photos with Santa, an additional photo booth area with props, games, crafts, juice and snacks (popcorn and cookies), and a movie in the CLC's Main Street Theater. Every child received a gift and candy cane ornament, and was encouraged to mail letters to Santa using the mailbox provided by VAEA. Each adult in attendance was entered in a raffle drawing to win admission tickets to the Biltmore Estates

in Asheville, N.C., making this an exciting event for people of all ages. All activities, games and snacks were provided by VAEA, utilizing funds from membership dues, fundraisers, and proceeds from the annual 5K run held at the Salisbury VA Medical Center. Veterans from the CLC were also able to stop in and be a part of the fun.

Joseph Vaughn, Salisbury VA Health Care System Medical Center Director, attended and expressed how great it is that our Employee Association works toward hosting these types of events and creating a VA family. "The Employee Association made a Christmas miracle happen for a lot of children," he said. "It was awesome to see the kids having a great time. Several of our CLC residents enjoyed watching them as well!"

Nikki Chapman, Treasurer of the VAEA reported, "This was the largest Christmas party for the VAEA thus far!" Sadly, in 2018, the VAEA had to cancel the Children's Christmas party due to a very low response rate. For this year's party, the total number of children who



Kids at the Salisbury VAEA's annual Children's Christmas Party got to visit with Santa.

attended was 84! There was an announcement prior to the event stating, "Due to the overwhelming amount of emails for the Children's Christmas Party, we have no choice but to close registration early. We currently have 73 children signed up for the event." Next year, there is talk of holding the event with no limit on attendees so that all VA families in the area have the opportunity to join in the holiday fun.

VETERAN'S HOMELESS "STAND DOWN"

In times of war, exhausted combat units requiring time to rest and recover were removed from the battlefields to a place of relative security and safety. At secure base camp areas, troops were able to take care of personal hygiene, get clean uniforms, enjoy warm meals, receive medical and dental care, mail and receive letters, and enjoy the camaraderie of friends in a safe environment.

Today, Stand Down refers to a grassroots, community-based intervention program designed to help the nation's estimated 107,000



Amy Schrop, Dr. Lange-Altman, Director Collins & “Duch” Duchesneau

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VETERAN'S HOMELESS "STAND DOWN"

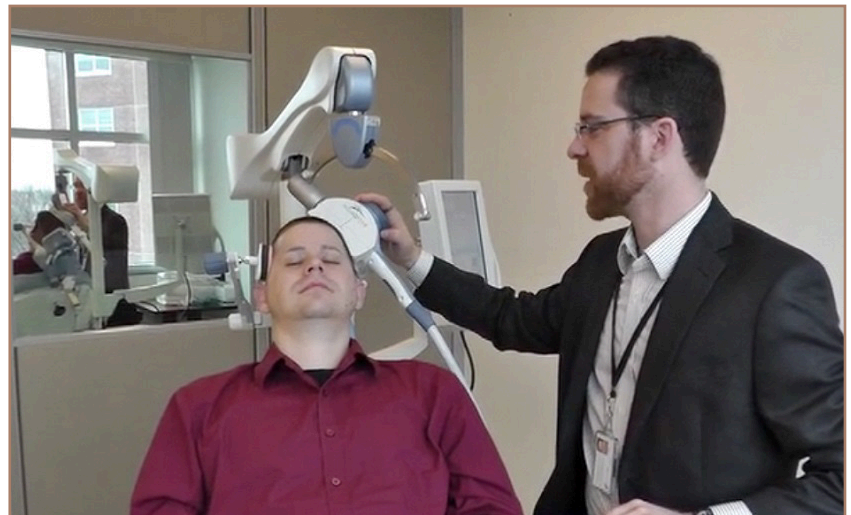
homeless Veterans on any given night to "combat" life on the streets. Homeless Veterans are brought together in a single location for one to three days and are provided access to the community resources needed to begin addressing their individual problems and rebuilding their lives. In the military, Stand Down afforded battle-weary soldiers the opportunity to renew their spirit, health and overall sense of wellbeing. Today's Stand Down affords the same opportunity to homeless Veterans.

The annual homeless outreach event, held on Nov. 16th at the Y.H. Thomas Community Center, was co-sponsored by the Hampton Military Affairs Committee and Hampton Veteran Affairs Medical Center with the unwavering support of Veteran Service Organizations and community volunteers. The Hampton VAMC Health Care for Homeless Veterans Program and Housing Urban Development Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing teams spearheaded the event with the support of Hampton VAMC programs and community organizations service providers. Areas represented include: employment services, health and wellness, legal services, suicide prevention, outpatient and residential mental health and substance abuse treatment, supportive services for Veteran families, LGBT, chaplain and family services, benefits and shelter programming. Hampton VAMC Executive Director David Collins was onsite and actively engaged in providing world-class service to our nations' heroes. Special thanks to all Hampton staff who made this event a success.



Director David C. Collins and Mayor Donnie Tuck

Salem VA Introduces TMS, Esketamine for Depression



Veterans with PTSD treated with Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation

By Alisa Adams | VSFS INTERN FOR SALEM VA MEDICAL CENTER

Salem VA Medical Center introduces two new forms of treatment for Veterans that suffer from mental health-related problems.

Mental health is a blanket term for a broad range of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive wellness — that is, it's how we feel, behave, and think. One of the most common types of mental health disorders is depression.

In 2018, the World Health Organization estimated that more than 300 million people worldwide suffer from depression, making it the most common mental health ailment. Common examples are postpartum depression, major depressive disorder, and bipolar disorder.

Dr. Delmar Short, MD, is a psychiatry specialist at the Salem VA Medical Center is excited about emerging treatments for depression.

One of the new treatments, is known as transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS). TMS is a noninvasive procedure that uses magnetic fields to stimulate brain cells. The procedure is proven safe and is available to patients

who haven't responded to antidepressant medications. The Food and Drug Administration approved the use of TMS in 2008. It is available at clinics and hospitals across the country, including the Salem VA Medical Center.

Of the procedure, Dr. Short says, "It's effective when other treatments aren't."

The other new treatment is Esketamine. The first thing you'll notice about the name is its similarity to ketamine. "That's because it's a more powerful form of ketamine," Dr. Short explains.

Esketamine was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 2018. It's administered via a prescription nasal spray and used in conjunction with oral medications. The main advantage of this drug is that it is fast-acting. Current medications take 7-14 days to reduce symptoms, a delay that increases the risk of suicide or other forms of self-harm.

After decades of no new treatments for sufferers of treatment-resistant depression, these two new treatments, available at Salem VA Medical Center, offer fresh, safe and effective alternatives.

VA's Patient Statement Portal Now Available Online

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced Dec. 18 that Veterans now have digital access to patient statements through AccessVA using their secure information for DS Logon, ID.me or MyHealtheVet Premium.

Veterans receiving VA care for non-service-connected conditions can view, download and print their patient statements using the Veter-

an Patient Statement selection on the AccessVA homepage.

"VA is committed to leveraging technology to help Veterans access their patient information quickly and conveniently," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "We believe these advancements will help Veterans manage their healthcare in more efficient ways."

Patient statements are available on AccessVA for up to six months, and include a summary of services Veterans receive at any VA medical facility. VA will continue to mail Veterans paper statements.

Brain Surgery Relieves Parkinson's Disease Symptoms of Army Veteran, Now Living His Best Life

Graphic illustration from article Curing depression and super-charging cranial capacity with deep brain stimulation by Sebastian Anthony, ExtremeTech online, Oct. 12, 2012.



Veteran Jeff Howe shows off his recent weight gain after a successful Deep Brain Stimulation surgery to help relieve Parkinson's disease symptoms. (Photo courtesy of Jeff Howe)



Jeff Howe at his lowest weight immediately following his DBS surgery. (Photo courtesy of Jeff Howe)

electrical current. To function as an “off switch” for certain brain signals that cause abnormal physical movements. This disruption restores more normal activity in the brain and, when successful, enables more controlled movement. The device runs on a battery pack inserted into the patient's upper chest. The effects of DBS are reversible and adjustable.

“It's not a cure, but it helps,” said Miriam Hirsch, DBS nurse coordinator and clinical research nurse in PADRECC. “People can get their lives back. One of the most statistically significant things people can do that may slow the progression of their disease is to exercise. Parkinson's disease can limit a person's ability to do that effectively.”

Howe had lost 23 pounds in eight months due to his condition. Also, his head and body would wiggle and writhe about six hours a day due to dyskinesia, a side effect to some medications. In a continuous state of movement, he was always exhausted.

“My VA neurologist in Salisbury referred me to the best,” Howe said. “I haven't had one head shake since the surgery.”

Dr. Paul Koch performed Howe's surgery in May 2019. Hirsch says, on average, DBS improves tremors as much as 80% and slowness and stiffness by 40% to 60%.

“I've gained 48 pounds since May, and now I'm 171 pounds solid,” Howe said. “I'm staying active. God is good and y'all are, too.”

The PADRECC clinic doesn't just treat Veterans with Parkinson's disease. The team treats Veterans with various movement disorders such as essential tremor, dystonia,

and Parkinson's, plus disorders like multiple system atrophy. This specialized team consists of neurosurgeons, a nurse practitioner, a nurse coordinator, neurologists, a physiatrist, a neuropsychologist and rehabilitation therapists.

With his newfound freedom of movement, Howe isn't slowing down.

“Deep Brain Stimulation made a world of difference to my quality of life,” Howe said. “I feel great now. I'm not able to work again, but doing a whole lot better than where I was. Now I'm active most of the day.”

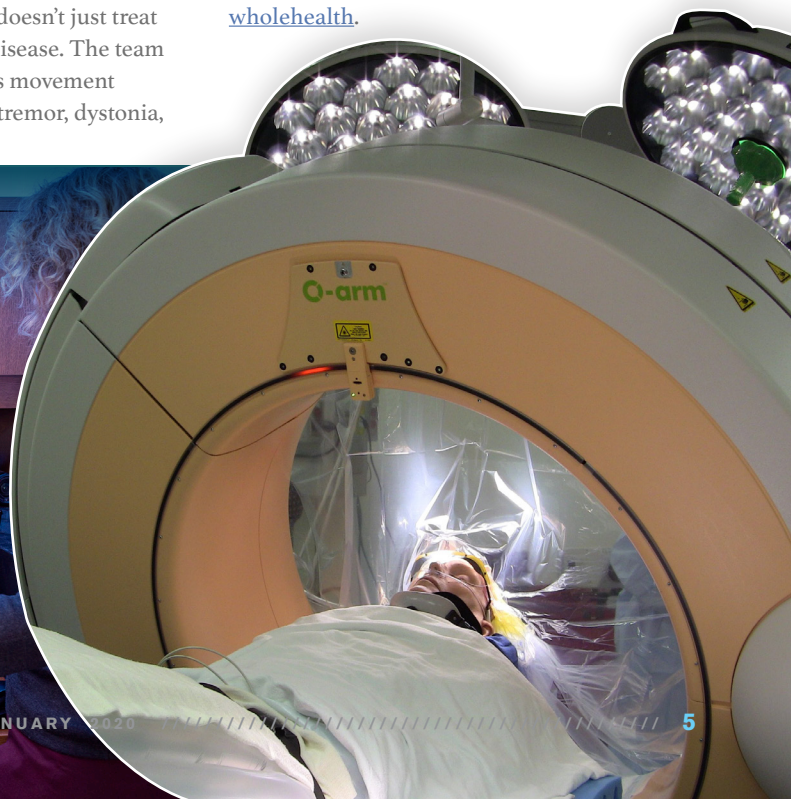
Hirsch says the PADRECC provides interdisciplinary, person centered care including, medication management, surgical intervention, nutrition, physical, occupational and speech rehabilitation, telehealth and neuropsychological assessment.

The entire hospital staff is the best,” Howe said. “Thanks to all for a new beginning.

For more information about PADRECC services, please visit: www.parkinsons.va.gov/Richmond or call (800) 784-8381 extension 5931. If you want to improve your quality of life, take charge and visit <https://www.va.gov/wholehealth>.

The Richmond Deep Brain Stimulation Clinic team conducts a telehealth follow-up visit with Veteran Jeff Howe. **Photo by Mary Beatty, Medical Illustrator**

Right Photo: Photo of model setup demonstrating operating room protocol for deep brain stimulation procedure. (Photo courtesy of Miriam Hirsch) >>



Veterans Find Assistance, Camaraderie at Vet Centers

By Adam Stump | VA OFFICE OF PUBLIC AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

At rows of tables in a packed community center, nearly five dozen Veterans smiled and swapped stories over a potluck meal. The Veterans spanned generations, from Vietnam, Cold War, Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan. Donning Veteran ball caps and jackets with their spouses nearby, the group swelled to about 100.

After the meal, hands shot up during a drawing. Shouts of “BINGO!” during the raffle brought laughs from the crowd. As Veterans heard their winning tickets called, Fayetteville Vet Center staff brought prizes to smiling Veterans. After the raffle, there were pats on the back, talking with old friends and meeting new ones. Two Veterans donning Marine Corps hats came together to talk for the first time, asking the other what unit the Marine served in.

This scene from the annual Christmas luncheon put on by the Fayetteville Vet Center Dec. 13 is typical of the camaraderie Veterans experience when they engage with any center, said Ed Clark from the Fayetteville Vet Center in North Carolina.

VET CENTER SERVICES

Congress established Vet Centers in 1979 because a significant number of Vietnam combat-era Veterans were not accessing VA services at the same levels as Korean and World War II Veterans. Over the past 40 years, Veterans have used Vet Centers as a place for assistance as well as camaraderie.

Vet Centers are community-based counseling centers. They provide a wide range of social and psychological services, including professional readjustment counseling. Eligible Veterans and active duty service members — including National Guard and Reserve components — and their families can use the services.

Vet Center staff offers readjustment counseling to make a successful transition from military to civilian life, or after a traumatic event experienced in the military. Staff offers individual, group, marriage and family counseling in addition to referral and connection to other VA or community benefits and services.

Vet Center counselors and outreach staff are, many times, Veterans themselves. Experienced staff can discuss the tragedies of war, loss, grief and transition after trauma.

Among the main benefits at Vet Centers are confidential readjustment counseling services. Clients can receive confidential readjustment counseling services at 300 Vet Centers, 80 mobile Vet Centers, numerous outstations and community access points as well as 24/7 through the Vet Center Call Center. More than 2,000 staff members are ready to assist eligible Veterans, active duty service members and their families with a wide range of services, ranging from socioeconomic concerns to dealing with the trauma associated with war, sexual assault and psychological injury.



Veterans who may start visiting the Vet Center because of their struggles often end up continuing to go because of the camaraderie and family-like atmosphere.

IMPACT

Howard Cunningham is one of those Veterans the Vet Center serves. Cunningham served in Vietnam from 1965-1968 and 1969-1972 with the 101st Airborne Division. He saw numerous fatalities during four and a half years of combat. Cunningham came in at the urging of a friend.

“I didn’t think there was anything wrong,” Cunningham said. “Then I saw my first counselor. I began to see what everyone else saw.” Cunningham has attended weekly group therapy sessions since 2002.

“I can deal with the rest of the week,” he said. “I’m with people who have gone through the same thing.”

Veterans often feel this sense of camaraderie, said Amy Meek, a readjustment counselor at Fayetteville. Meek, who’s been at the Vet Center for over 12 years, said Veterans continue to go so long because they develop strong relationships and the groups become like a family.

Most Vet Centers offer services at multiple locations. For example, the Fayetteville Vet Center resides just outside Fort Bragg, but offers group counseling at multiple locations within a 50-mile radius.

THE RESULTS SHOW

One Vietnam Veteran came up to Clark unsolicited. He told the story of the first time he came into the Fayetteville Vet Center.

Following a self-described “bad day,” the Veteran disappeared. His wife, worried the Veteran may harm himself, started making frantic calls. The Veteran walked into the Fayetteville Vet Center. A counselor stopped him and said he looked like he was having a rough day. The counselor poured two cups of coffee, talking to the Veteran for hours. In summation, the Veteran was point blank in the outcome that day.

“She saved my life.”



Veterans talk at the Christmas luncheon put on by the Fayetteville Vet Center Dec. 13, 2019.

VA Introduces New Direct Deposit Options for Veterans, Beneficiaries

Partners with Association of Military Banks of America

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), in partnership with the Association of Military Banks of America (AMBA), launched the Veterans Benefits Banking Program (VBBP), available as of Dec. 20.

The program provides Veterans and their beneficiaries the chance to safely, reliably, and inexpensively receive and manage their VA monetary benefits through financial services at participating banks.

"VBBP offers another way to simplify banking choices to help eligible Veterans select the right bank for themselves and their families," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "The VA and AMBA are proud to provide this opportunity to connect veterans with banks that understand their needs."

VA's collaboration with AMBA leverages its consortium of military-friendly financial institutions that cater to service members. AMBA is the only trade association representing banking institutions specializing in providing services for military personnel, Veterans, and their families around the world. VBBP leverages participating AMBA institutions and banks operating within the gates of installations of all branches of

service and National Guard and Reserve components.

"AMBA and its member banks welcome the opportunity to provide our nation's Veterans additional financial services options to help them achieve greater financial independence, resiliency, and literacy," said AMBA president and Air Force Veteran Steve Lepper. "We hope that as Veterans recognize the benefits of working with the banks to achieve financial stability, more Veterans, banks and credit unions will join this effort."

The current available banking options include direct deposit into an existing bank account, electronic funds transfer into a Direct Express pre-paid debit card, and mailing of a paper check for pre-approved beneficiaries. VBBP introduces new financial resources to Veterans and their beneficiaries.

The program is an effort to address the problems some Veterans experience using these payment methods. VBBP offers these VA beneficiaries — including many who have been unable to open bank accounts in the past — the opportunity to deposit their benefit funds directly into existing or new bank accounts offered by participating AMBA member banks.

Neither VA nor AMBA is endorsing any particular bank or requiring Veterans and other beneficiaries to use them. It does not require Veterans who are satisfied with their current financial situation to change how they receive their VA monetary benefits.

All Veterans and other beneficiaries — who currently receive more than \$118 billion in financial benefits through VA — are eligible to access this program. There are approximately 250,000 Veterans and beneficiaries who receive their VA benefits through a pre-paid debit card or paper check who may not have a bank account.

VA's Veterans Banking Benefits and AMBA's Veterans Benefits Banking Program websites have details for identifying participating banks.

To have your federal benefits electronically transferred to a Veteran's designated financial institution (e.g. bank), VA beneficiaries interested in changing direct deposit options can also call 1-800-827-1000 with their relevant banking information.

VA financial literacy information is an additional resource available to Veterans and VA beneficiaries.

VA Improves Health Care Facility Performance Transparency

Move makes it easier for Veterans to compare VA, non-VA health care facilities

WASHINGTON — On Dec. 11, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced key changes to increase transparency and ensure that Veterans have the best information regarding the performance of VA health care facilities.

As part of this effort, VA will discontinue its star-rating system, making it easier for Veterans to compare VA facilities with non-VA facilities in their local area.

"Star ratings were developed as an internal tool meant to compare one VA facility to another," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "These ratings do not provide insight as to how our hospitals stack up against nearby non-VA facilities and are therefore of little value in helping Veterans make informed health care decisions. This change will make it easier for Veterans to choose the best possible care close to home, when and where they need it."

The website homepage for each VA hospital now features links to comparative tools relating to wait times, quality of medical care, and patient experience ratings. This information is drawn from quality-of-care measures provided by industry-standard sources including — but not limited to — the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, National Committee for Quality Assurance and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

Star ratings are often misinterpreted, as they compare VA facilities by ranking them across the department's health care system,

rather than by geography, population characteristics or unique care offerings. Additionally, Veterans in VA focus groups have indicated that they do not consult the star ratings in making decisions about VA care.

As the National Quality Forum's Nov. 6 issue brief, Hospital Quality Star Rating Summit, points out, star ratings of health care facilities can often misrepresent an assessment of overall hospital quality, "leading consumers to choose hospitals that were not the best at delivering the care they needed ... when they might have been the best place for a person with a particular condition to receive care."

While VA has published star ratings for the final time, the department will continue to make public its own detailed, Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning (SAIL) data, to monitor and internally manage hospital system performance within the Veterans Health Administration. SAIL assesses more than 60 quality metrics in areas such as death rates, complications, safety and patient satisfaction, as well as overall efficiency and physician capacity at individual VA Medical Centers.

In accordance with Government Accountability Office recommendations in 2017 and 2019, these changes will help Veterans to navigate the many new choices available to them under the MISSION Act, a landmark law that puts Veterans at the center of their health care decisions.

VETERANS LIFE CENTER NORTH CAROLINA

VA Medical Center Directors Joe Vaughn (Salisbury), Dan Ducker (Fayetteville) and Paul Crews (Durham) recently got together to tour the Veterans Life Center, currently under construction in Butner, N.C.



Veterans Life Center Helps Veterans in Crisis

By Joshua D. Edson | DURHAM VA HCS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

In 2010, a small group of young Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Veterans began looking for ways to solve the unique problems that many service members face after their service. The group of retired military leaders had no funds and no contacts, just an overwhelming need to help their fellow Veterans. Their goal: to seek and assist OEF, OIF and New Dawn Veterans who were suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), unemployment, and substance abuse issues. After nearly a decade, they are about to see their vision become a reality.

Scheduled to open in April 2020, the Veterans Life Center of North Carolina (VLCNC) will provide a carefully planned welcome for Veterans in crisis. Located in Butner, N.C., the facility consists of dormitory living quarters for 76 male and 24 female Veterans, a full commercial kitchen, a first aid station, a chapel, a library and computer lab, as well as other modern-day tools that will help Veterans.

"This [center] has been in the works since 2013," says VLCNC Communication Director Jay Bryant. "At first, the Community Development Block Grant we received was going to be used for the renovation of an existing, World War II-era building. When that fell through, we secured a lease to build a new facility from scratch."

To help reach its goal of assisting Veterans, the center has cultivated some powerful partnerships. The R.J. Blackly Center, which sits adjacent to the VLCNC, will provide substance abuse treatment and counseling. The nearby Vance-Granville Community College will provide vocational training opportunities to center residents, while both the North Carolina Central Regional Hospital and the Durham VA Healthcare System (DVAHCS) are slated to provide mental health care services. These partners will also help the center by referring potential residents.

To qualify for center residency Veter-

ans must be eligible for medical services through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), they must have fought in Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation New Dawn and they must be a former service member that is seeking therapy, educational/vocational training or life skills development. Some final qualifications for Veterans seeking assistance through the VLCNC include a desire to receive the help being offered to them and a willingness to contribute to their own recovery. To affirm these qualifications, Veterans are expected to perform a verbal and written agreement with the VLCNC.

Once accepted, Veterans can remain at the center for up to two years. The VLCNC staff will create an individual plan to help the Veteran successfully re-integrate into civilian life.

"It's an honor and privilege to continue to serve my Nation by helping my fellow Veterans," says VLCNC Executive Director Thomas Gorry. "Being a disabled Veteran myself, I know the challenges out there are real, so it's my honor to help other Veterans overcome these difficulties."

For more information about the VLCNC or to give a donation, please visit www.vlnc.org or call (919) 803-5516.



Joseph Vaughn, Director of the Bill Hefner VA Medical Center in Salisbury, N.C. and John Turner, Senior Advisor of the VLCNC discuss construction progress for the VLCNC building in Butner, N.C. Slated to open in April 2020, the center will provide reintegration services to at-risk 21st-century Veterans.

VA Announces Proposal to Increase Access to Dental Care

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently announced that it has submitted to Congress a waiver request and pilot program under Section 152 of the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (MISSION Act) to improve access to dental care for Veterans.

The MISSION Act authorizes VA to submit statutory waivers to Congress for the purpose of testing innovative service delivery models to improve the quality of care for America's Veterans. Under the existing statute, VA has limited authority to provide dental services for Veterans. With this waiver request, VA is submitting a proposal to increase access to dental services for enrolled Veterans ineligible for dental services through VA by connecting them with community-based, pro bono or discounted dental service providers.

"The MISSION Act gave Veterans real choice over their healthcare decisions," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert L. Wilkie. "Through this pilot proposal, we want to ensure Veterans have access to quality dental care through a network of providers who are proud to serve America's heroes."

Poor oral health can have a significant negative effect on overall health. Clinical research has found possible connections between gum problems and heart disease, bacterial pneumonia, and stroke. Upon approval of this pilot, VA will work with groups such as the American Dental Association and Federally Qualified Health Centers across the U.S. to offer pro bono and discounted dental services to Veterans.

"This waiver submission opens the door to years of groundbreaking innovation under the MISSION Act to improve care for our Veterans, who are top of mind for this President and this Administration every single day," said Director Joe Grogan of the White House Domestic Policy Council.

Section 152 of the MISSION Act led VA to establish a Center for Care and Payment Innovation to test payment and service delivery models, with the goal of reducing expenditures while preserving or enhancing the quality of care for Veterans. In implementing this section, the Secretary was granted authority to waive statutory requirements that may impede innovative approaches upon notification of and approval from Congress. The dental care proposal, titled the Care Coordination for Dental Benefits demonstration project under the Community Provider Collaborations for Veterans Pilot Program, is the first waiver request and pilot program submitted to Congress under this authority.

The VA Innovation Center, led by Michael Akinyele, is implementing Section 152 of the VA MISSION Act under the Office of Enterprise Integration. VA published a proposed rule (RIN 2900-AQ56) establishing the Center for Innovation for Care and Payment on July 29, 2019 (84 FR 36507). VA published a final rule implementing its authority on Oct. 25, 2019; this rule became effective on Nov. 25, 2019. "This pilot program enables us to explore leading practices across the U.S. health care system to meet Veterans' needs today and into the future," said Dr. Melissa S. Glynn, Assistant Secretary for Enterprise Integration.

VA will publish details of the Community Provider Collaborations for Veterans pilot program for public comment in the Federal Register.



These Veterans were the first to participate in the Charles George VA Medical Center's creative writing sessions designed to help with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Charles George recently applied to the VHA Innovation Network Spark-Seed-Spread program to catalyze new programs.

Creative Writing Program helps Vietnam Veterans with PTSD regain their lives

By Vance Janes | PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER, CHARLES GEORGE VA MEDICAL CENTER

ASHEVILLE, N.C. -- They say a picture's worth a thousand words, but sometimes a thousand words can help a person with PTSD regain their humanity and begin to heal.

At least that's the view of Dr. Bruce Kelly, now Assistant Chief of Primary Care and lead for the Creative Writing Program at the Charles George VA Medical Center.

"Writing programs for veterans have existed since the Second World War to help them make sense of their military experience. It's a way to honor the voice inside wanting to be heard," Kelly said. "Writing about the experiences of combat and its impact helps organize what's banging around inside. It can with time soften the grip that holds power over those who've seen the horrors of war."

To help Veterans who've suffered from PTSD for 50 years – Kelly, along with former North Carolina Poet Laureate Joseph Bathanti, a professor at Appalachian State University,

began planning a creative writing program back in 2014. They both keenly felt the unmet moral obligation we as a nation have to this cohort of veterans.

"We believed the work could help heal what remained wounded," Kelly said. "As I recruited men during routine medical visits, I began to see more deeply how remarkable they each were, all heroes in their own right who needed to unburden themselves.

"They told me they were reluctant to bring the war back up," Kelly added, "that creative writing seemed like a 'cockamamie idea,' that they couldn't write, had trouble spelling, bad experiences with groups and more. But they gradually spoke too about the wounds that haunted them and were often ready to try anything that might help."

Kelly said he, Bathanti and the Veterans were all nervous when they met for the first time.

"It was something new and untried for all of us," he said. "As their physician, I was maybe more uneasy than any, knowing how hard they worked to control what haunted them. They were understandably anxious about the writing and opening up in deeply personal ways to a group of strangers."

Kelly said that after handing the first session over to Bathanti he went to the back of the class to watch the men's expressions and body language. He was ready for anything, including some walking out.

A film writer couldn't have scripted what he saw next.

When they were asked to begin writing, in unison they picked up their pencils, put their heads down, opened their notebooks and began to write without a moment's hesitation.

"They might not all be storytellers, but they were all ready to tell their stories," Kelly said, quoting Ron Capps of The Veterans Writing Project.

It was just the beginning, but what a beginning it was.

Thanks to funding from the North Carolina Arts Council, North Carolina Humanities Council, other state-based granting agencies and strong community support, there have now been four eight-week sessions involving 38 veterans in Asheville.

Kelly has continued to meet monthly with 25 of them. He and Bathanti stay in frequent email, phone and personal contact to support the men in their writing and healing journey. Charles George Whole Health funding supported Mr. Bathanti this fall to hold a group for another 10 veterans at the Hickory CBOC to begin expanding the work.

When asked how the program has helped them, one Veteran had this to say:

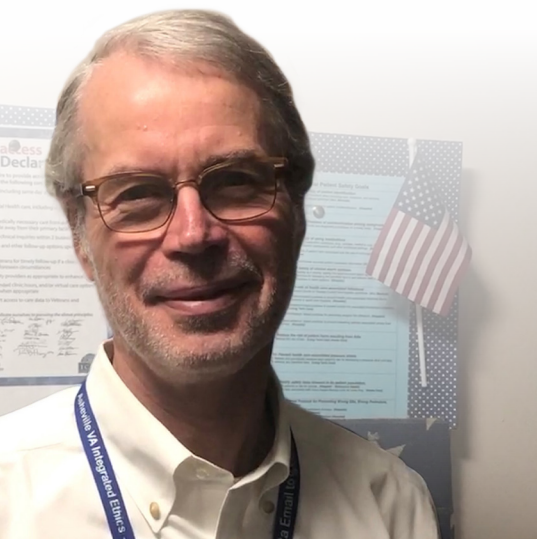
"My relationships with my family have improved since they've heard my writings. They understand me better now, and I better understand my moral injury. I've connected with veterans who share my experiences and built new friendships. I've been able to express thoughts and feelings held in for 50 long years."

Another Veteran agreed and said:

"My Grandmother and teachers encouraged me to write about my experiences in Vietnam. I couldn't do it until I heard other vets who felt the same. I couldn't write Poetry until I learned from the leaders and other vets in the room. I didn't want to talk or think about Vietnam. This experience forced me to refresh my memory. Turns out it's been good for me and my quality of life."

In 2016, 18 of the men first agreed to participate in a staged reading at Asheville Community Theatre titled "Brothers Like These." They performed later that year at Appalachian State to a standing-room-only crowd of students and teachers. Veterans from the recent groups have joined in. The full staged reading has now been performed at eight locations across North Carolina.

On each occasion the audience is deeply touched, many at some point in tears, but always leaving with a new understanding and respect



Dr. Bruce Kelly, now Assistant Chief of Primary Care and lead for the Creative Writing Program, said he was heartened that 17 VAs across 12 states signed on to participate, with five VAs across the VISN being funded. Salisbury, Durham, Wilmington, Fayetteville and Hampton, Virginia, will start programs based on the Asheville model.

STORY CONTINUED ON PAGE 11



Richmond's VIP Center Improves Quality of Life for Veterans

By Megan Kon

A U.S. Coast Guard Veteran came to the Veterans Integrative Pain (VIP) Center at the Central Virginia VA Health Care System to find relief from her chronic pain and depression. Fifty-eight-year-old Osretta Miller struggled to walk and often didn't want to leave her house. She spoke to her primary care doctor at VA who recommended the VIP Center as an option for further treatment.

Miller's pain was caused by inflammation and fibromyalgia.

"I could barely walk; my hands were very tender," Miller said. "I was really messed up when I first began."

Biofeedback was one of the treatments Miller tried at the VIP Center. Biofeedback is a body-based treatment teaching Veterans how to improve control over their nervous system, which is often out of balance due to chronic pain.

"The stress or fight-flight response can be turned on all the time when someone has chronic pain, resulting in a host of physical and emotional issues over time," said Natasha Mroczek, a clinical health psychologist in the VIP Center. "They can include worsening pain, depression and insomnia to name a few."

Mroczek says Biofeedback helps people gain better control over their stress response, winding it down when it's not needed and engaging the relaxation or recovery response more often.

The biofeedback machine has sensors attached to the body providing real time vitals like heart rate, breathing, skin temperature, perspiration, muscle tension and brain waves.

"I can do things on my own now," Miller said. "The program worked for me. My family has seen a big difference. I'm nowhere near where I was."

Elmer Ligh, a physical therapist and lead biofeedback provider in the VIP Center, treated over 100 Veterans last year, including Miller, with biofeedback treatment.

"I have seen how chronic pain affects Veterans more than just physically," said Ligh. "Using biofeedback, I'm able to address the biopsychosocial aspects of chronic pain and empower Veterans by teaching them new skills which will help them experience their pain from a new perspective."

Ligh's outcomes have been overwhelmingly positive. After about eight weekly biofeedback sessions, Veterans have reported significant improvements in their activity level, sleep, mood and stress.

"Everything in the program really does work, if you apply it," Miller said.

When Miller first came to the clinic, she said she experienced a pain level of greater than 10. Now, her pain level stays around four or less.

The VIP Center has a variety of treatment options available to Veterans with chronic pain. Movement-based treatments include Tai Chi and Sarete Aikido. There are education and psychotherapy-based modalities such as, mindfulness meditation, cognitive behavioral therapy, and one of Miller's favorites, the anti-inflammatory diet group.

"I lost at least 20 pounds from changing my diet and learning how to read food labels," Miller said. She graduated from the program in Novem-

RIGHT PHOTO: U.S. Coast Guard Veteran Osretta Miller is with Elmer Ligh, lead biofeedback provider, discussing how happy she is with her results after graduating from the VIP Center. **LEFT PHOTO:** A Veteran at the VIP Center relaxes as a nurse performs an ear acupuncture treatment during a recent mindfulness class. (Photo Credit: Megan Kon)

ber 2018 and went from a size 18 in clothing to a size 10.

Complementary treatments such as medical acupuncture, chiropractic care, music therapy and support groups can also be added to a Veteran's care plan, if needed.

The goals are to improve the quality of life for Veterans with chronic pain, restore daily functioning, improve emotional health and increase healthy coping strategies.

VIP Center is a self-referral program. Please click [here](#) for more information.

If you want to improve your quality of life, take charge and visit <https://www.va.gov/wholehealth>.



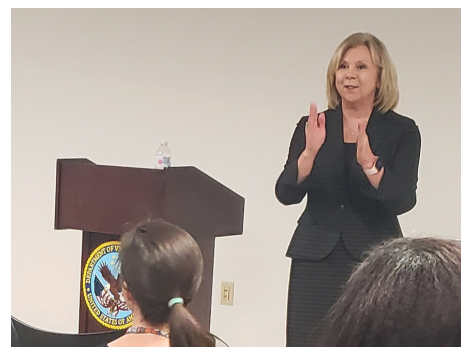
Choose VA

ASHEVILLE, N.C. -- DeAnne Seekins, Mid-Atlantic Health Care Network Director, spoke to Care in the Community staff members along with others at the Charles George VA Medical Center recently. The candid discussion was part of Seekins' visit to the facility where she met with various employees to go over progress following the MISSION Act's implementation in early June.

The discussions culminated with everyone reaffirming that they want Veterans to choose VA for their healthcare needs.

Seekins drove home that Veterans have a choice; eligibility for community care doesn't mean Veterans have to choose community care, they can choose VA.

"Access does not equate to quality," Seekins said. (Photo by Vance Janes)





Salisbury VA Advances Whole Health Through Caring Science Affiliation

By Christina L. Vair, PhD | SALISBURY VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM, WHOLE HEALTH DIRECTOR

The Salisbury VA Health Care System (SVAHCS) was honored to host world-renowned nurse theorist, professor, and author, Dr. Jean Watson, PhD, RN, FAAN for a two-day visit in December 2019. Joined by her Watson Caring Science Institute colleague, Dr. Mary Rockwood Lane, PhD, RN, FAAN, Dr. Watson's visit kicked off recognition of the SVAHCS as a National Affiliate of the Watson Caring Science Institute (WCSI). The visit included facilitated discussions among staff by Dr. Watson and an experiential workshop on bringing creative arts into health care environments with Dr. Rockwood Lane. Dr. Watson also served as the keynote speaker for the Caring Circle Leadership Program graduation ceremony. This ceremony recognized registered nurses across the organization who successfully completed a locally developed 12-

week Caring Science professional development program.

In order to become an affiliate of the WCSI, an organization must demonstrate deep-rooted and sustainable commitment to integrating Caring Science within practices and policies, seeking to transform and broaden the notion of health and healing for staff as well as patients, families and the communities it serves. As the VISN 6 Whole Health Flagship site, the SVAHCS has made various efforts to support Veterans and VA employees in co-creating healing relationships that help Veterans achieve their best health and live better lives. Both Drs. Watson and Rockwood Lane spoke to the ways that Whole Health and Caring Science create innovative opportunities to guide the VA into a cultural transformation towards person-centered care

and practices. A focus on health and healing as opposed to disease drives both the Whole Health model and Caring Science principles.

Following the visit, Dr. Watson commented that she is "excited by the experiences and vision for [the] future and how we can co-create some new possibilities based upon the vision and grounding of programs there at the Salisbury VA. Mary and I are here to stay the course and connect with you and this work as we go forward." Consistent with the goals of Whole Health, the SVAHCS will continue to collaborate with the Watson Caring Science Institute to advance opportunities to create healing environments, engage Veterans in healing relationships, and support employees across the organization in partnerships that embrace health and wellness.

VISN 6 Sites Of Care & VA Vet Centers

MEDICAL CENTERS

Asheville VAMC

1100 Tunnel Road
Asheville, NC 28805
828-298-7911 | 800-932-6408
www.asheville.va.gov

Durham VAMC

508 Fulton Street
Durham, NC 27705
919-286-0411 | 888-878-6890
www.durham.va.gov

Fayetteville VAMC

2300 Ramsey Street
Fayetteville, NC 28301
910-488-2120 | 800-771-6106
www.fayettevilleenc.va.gov

Hampton VAMC

100 Emancipation Dr.
Hampton, VA 23667
757-722-9961 | 866-544-9961
www.hampton.va.gov

Richmond VAMC

1201 Broad Rock Blvd.
Richmond, VA 23249
804-675-5000 | 800-784-8381
www.richmond.va.gov

Salem VAMC

1970 Roanoke Blvd.
Salem, VA 24153
540-982-2463 | 888-982-2463
www.salem.va.gov

Salisbury VAMC

1601 Brenner Ave.
Salisbury, NC 28144
704-638-9000 | 800-469-8262
www.salisbury.va.gov

OUTPATIENT CLINICS

Albemarle CBOC

1845 W City Drive
Elizabeth City, NC 27909
252-331-2191

Brunswick County CBOC

18 Doctors Cl., Units 2 & 3
Supply, NC 28462 | 910-754-6141

Charlotte CBOC

8601 University East Drive
Charlotte, NC 28213
704-597-3500

Charlotte HCC

3506 W. Tyvola Rd.
Charlotte, NC 28208
704-329-1300

Charlottesville CBOC

590 Peter Jefferson Pkwy
Charlottesville, VA 22911
434-293-3890

Chesapeake CBOC

1987 S. Military Highway
Chesapeake, VA 23320
757-722-9961

Danville CBOC

705 Piney Forest Rd.
Danville, VA 24540
434-710-4210

Emporia CBOC

1746 East Atlantic Street
Emporia, VA 23847
434-348-1500

Fayetteville HCC

7300 So. Raeford Rd
Fayetteville NC 28304
910-488-2120 | 800-771-6106

Fayetteville Rehabilitation Clinic

4101 Raeford Rd. Ste 100-B
Fayetteville NC 28304
910-908-2222

Franklin CBOC

647 Wayah Street
Franklin, NC 28734-3390
828-369-1781

Fredericksburg CBOC

130 Executive Center Pkwy
Fredericksburg, VA 22401
540-370-4468

Fredericksburg at Southpoint CBOC

10401 Spotsylvania Ave, Ste 300
Fredericksburg, VA 22408
540-370-4468

Goldsboro CBOC

2610 Hospital Road
Goldsboro, NC 27909
919-731-4809

Greenville HCC

401 Moye Blvd.
Greenville, NC 27834
252-830-2149

Hamlet CBOC

100 Jefferson Street
Hamlet, NC 28345
910-582-3536

Hickory CBOC

2440 Century Place,
SE Hickory, NC 28602
828-431-5600

Hillandale Rd. Annex

1824 Hillandale Road Durham
North Carolina 27705
919-383-6107

Jacksonville CBOC

4006 Henderson Drive
Jacksonville, NC 28546
910-353-6406

Jacksonville 2 VA Clinic

306 Brynn Marr Road
Jacksonville, NC 28546
910-353-6406

Jacksonville 3 VA Clinic

4 Josh Court
Jacksonville, NC 28546
910-353-6406

Kernersville HCC

1695 Kernersville Medical Pkwy
Kernersville, NC 27284
336-515-5000

Lynchburg CBOC

1600 Lakeside Drive
Lynchburg, VA 24501
434-316-5000

Morehead City CBOC

5420 U.S. 70
Morehead City, NC 28557
252-240-2349

Raleigh CBOC

3305 Sungate Blvd.
Raleigh, NC 27610
919-212-0129

Raleigh II Annex

3040 Hammond Business Place
Raleigh, NC 27603
919-899-6259

Raleigh III CBOC

2600 Atlantic Ave, Ste 200
Raleigh, NC 27604
919-755-2620

Robeson County CBOC

139 Three Hunts Drive
Pembroke, NC 28372
910-272-3220

Rutherford County CBOC

374 Charlotte Road
Rutherfordton, NC 28139
828-288-2780

Sanford CBOC

3112 Tramway
Road Sanford, NC 27332
919-775-6160

Staunton CBOC

102 Lacy B. King Way
Staunton, VA 24401
540-886-5777

Tazewell CBOC

141 Ben Bolt Ave.
Tazewell, VA 24651
276-988-8860

Virginia Beach CBOC

244 Clearfield Avenue
Virginia Beach, VA
757-722-9961

Wilmington HCC

1705 Gardner Rd.
Wilmington, NC 28405
910-343-5300

Wytheville CBOC

165 Peppers Ferry Rd.
Wytheville, VA 24382-2363
276-223-5400

DIALYSIS CENTERS

VA Dialysis and Blind Rehabilitation Clinics at Brier Creek

8081 Arco Corporate Drive
Raleigh, NC 27617
919-286-5220

VA Dialysis Clinic Fayetteville

2301 Robeson Street, Ste. 101
Fayetteville, NC 28305, 910-483-9727

VET CENTERS

Charlotte Vet Center

2114 Ben Craig Dr.
Charlotte, NC 28262
704-549-8025

Fayetteville Vet Center

2301 Robeson Street
Fayetteville, NC 28305
910-488-6252

Greensboro Vet Center

3515 W Market Street, Suite 120
Greensboro, NC 27403
336-333-5366

Greenville Vet Center

1021 W.H. Smith Blvd.
Greenville, NC 27834
252-355-7920

Jacksonville, N.C. Vet Center

110-A Branchwood Drive
Jacksonville, NC 28546
910-577-1100

Norfolk Vet Center

1711 Church Street
Norfolk, VA 23504
757-623-7584

Raleigh Vet Center

8851 Ellistree Lane
Raleigh, NC 27617
(919) 361-6419

Roanoke Vet Center

1401 Franklin Rd SW
Roanoke, VA 24016
540-342-9726

Virginia Beach Vet Center

324 Southport Circle, Suite 102
Virginia Beach, VA 23452
757-248-3665

VISN 6 Newsletter

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Questions or comments about the newsletter, email stephen.wilkins2@va.gov or call 919-956-5541

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